## **Beyond Generation Green: Jill Jones and the Ecopoetic Process**

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As the poet Denise Riley has pointed out, a reviewer may 'think up the most ingeniously elaborate sources for something in the text that had a plainer association, a far less baroque connection, behind it' (Riley 74). It's no use protesting because nobody ever listens. Everyone knows that the text has its own life, that the 'author' is a divided creature only partly in control of the words on the page. The critic, finally, is free to write what she likes.

So when, in July 2013, I heard Jill Jones read the poem that is the focus of this paper at Readings bookshop in Melbourne, and she announced that it is littered with references to Kevin Rudd, or Krudd as she chose to call him, I decided to allow this claim only the status of a retrospective interpretation by the poet developed in the heat of the political moment, adding at most an extra layer of irony to my own reading of the work. It is not impossible that the poet set up the narrative voice of this text not as an expression of her own position at the time of writing, but as an object for examination. Nevertheless, I have decided to let my own reading of the work, partial as it may be, to stand. An academic essay is almost always a clumsy piece of work, compared to the poem itself.<sup>1</sup>

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'I don't belong to generation green,' announces the narrator of 'Leaving It To the Sky,' which was published in Jones's collection *Dark Bright Doors* in 2010 (78–79). Michael Farrell identifed this poem as one of his favourites in the book, describing it as 'uncharacteristically (relatively) aggressive,' and as showing 'another side to the generally more philosophical—if problematising—poet.' In his words, 'Jones shrugs off any readers who want to identify her as a contemporary eco-friendly product, that's a bit more expensive than the generic brand but better for the soul/conscience/planet.' The poem takes the form of a catalogue of rejections, an accumulation of negative self-definitions, a marking of boundaries: partly the consequence, perhaps, of a change of place, from Sydney to Adelaide—the poet's experience of being dislodged from her comfort zone. It's a defiant performance, written as if in real time, in the few moments between the beginning and end of a pathetic sprinkling of rain in the middle of a long drought: 'piss-weak,' says the narrator.

The first stanza identifies a conservatism in Adelaide that has infected even the gay community: 'All around are little dogs. Hail, the queens / of suburbia!' and goes on to lash out at the demands of corporate culture, finishing up with a self-characterisation that could be read as either determined or miserable, depending on the tone of voice: 'I'll never be a unit-shifter. I / can't explain why.' The natural world, for this city narrator, puts in an appearance in strictly urban forms: the swans down by the river, which—in contrast to the sublime creatures of Yeats's 'Wild Swans at Coole' (Yeats 64)—'aren't wild, just nasty': feral, aggressive pests creating problems for human picnics.

The second stanza collages forms of public language—from commerce, from sport, from the history of 20th-century feminism—into the beginnings of a self-conscious self-questioning: 'Am I my own provocateur?' Getting oneself into trouble, as usual. This divided self is

challenged by the appalling certainties of heritage culture: 'geraniums, bottlebrush and roses,' and also by a symbol of 21st-century finance capital and technology: the Westpac building. In contrast, in the third stanza, there's a return to childhood memory and older forms of communication: 'the ink patterns between east and west,' in contrast to the bank's 'sky tentacles'; and the sky puts in another appearance with the beautiful line: 'Whichever way the weather moves, it's depending on blue.' The narrator however shrinks into a confined space—'all around, there's a smell of toast and tomatoes'—in which she relies on 'radio, voices, distance'; and cuts the practice of poetry ruthlessly down to size: 'I'm having a yak with a piece of paper.' As with those swans, sublimity is not on the agenda.

Throughout this jaundiced catalogue of cultural phenomena runs another theme: that of the transformation of human consciousness and communication, from old-fashioned paper and ink to the bundle of electronic gizmos on top of the Westpac building. (Even the name 'Westpac,' or 'Western Pacific,' has some tacky significance here: a brand name dating from 1982, claiming regional significance for the former, old-established Bank of New South Wales.)

It's a theme that runs through many of the poems in the book. The title of the book, *Dark Bright Doors*, appears to have been given a visual illustration in the high contrast of an Annette Willis photo: the bright circle of light from a round window, the dark solid panels in the lower part of an old door. But as Bev Braune pointed out in her review of the book, the phrase also refers to a Microsoft PowerPoint stock photo 'dark bright door.' We are in at least two different places: a cemetery in Paris, and in front of some unlocated computer screen. To complicate matters further, the photo on the back cover is of the staircase of an early twentieth-century café in Prague.

Place, in other words, has been disrupted. Cyberspace asserts itself: in 'Yeah yeah,' images of information flow, blinking cursors, the dark computer screen and the tired human eyes and body culminate with:

Wired, weary in beautiful waste then they turn off the air, yeah.

In 'Leaving It To the Sky,' what is set against this array of the corporate, the conservative, and the clichéd draws on a different tradition, based in 1950s Australia, beginning with 'my father's ukulele,' a daggy memory from childhood. This may be the Kevin Rudd moment: 'the grandpa slang from the 1950s,' in the apposite words of Jacqueline Maley in the *Age*: 'give me Iced / Vovos, cups of strong tea, and a work ethic.'

No sooner are these values asserted than the narrator's present dilemma is restated: the qualified nostalgia for a different kind of city. There's also a bafflement in the face of the enormous land mass to the north of Adelaide: 'Flesh imagines me back / east, the desert imagines nothing I imagine.' Farrell speaks of 'a new sense that indeterminacy and uncertainty can be presented in a more determined and bold fashion.' Jones herself, commenting in her blog *Ruby Street* (12 October 2011) on Farrell's assessment, accepted that 'there are things 'up with which I will not put' any longer. A new assertiveness, rather than the previous assertiveness (which is there, if you look).'

What exactly is this 'generation green' that is being rejected here? Through the lens of Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,' I want to examine the ways that time and place can be said to interact in a version of what it may mean for a poet to be environmentally concerned, that does not involve signing up to a charter of good behaviour, to certain political groupings, or even to labels such as 'eco-feminist' or 'eco-political.' I will begin with the angel of history.

In 1920, just after the end of the first world war, Paul Klee produced his drawing 'Angelus Novus,' new angel. It shows a stylised, oddly two-dimensional creature, rather papery and frail, holding up its hands in horror. Its eyes are looking in different directions, beyond the viewer. Its teeth are alarmingly large and pointy. Walter Benjamin bought the drawing in Munich in the spring of 1921, and left it with his friend Gershom Scholem while he went on his travels. It became something of a jokey talisman. In July, Scholem sent him a set of verses in the angel's voice for his birthday, drawing attention to the angel's likenesses to Benjamin himself, and in 1922 it gave its name to a projected journal which never saw the light of day. Nearly twenty years later Klee's angel appeared at the heart of Benjamin's final work, 'On the Concept of History,' written in 1940, with the Nazi armies gathering on the border with France:

His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. . . . A storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (392)

As Benjamin's translator Rolf Tiedemann has said, 'Little could be more characteristic of the author and less typical of the time . . . than the fact that there is no discursive explication at the center of the text, but an image instead' (176). Benjamin himself knew that a complex, self-contradictory text like 'On the Concept of History' ran the risk of being misinterpreted. And this image has indeed been used, over and over again, to present us with a catastrophic version of history: a single pile of debris rising to the sky. There is nothing in this version of the past that offers us hope for the future.

I read this passage, on the contrary, as a critique of that view, and as an assertion of the possibility of future change. The standpoint of the critic, in this paragraph, is, as Peter Osborne has stated, the reverse of that of the melancholy, depressive angel (Osborne 91). We see a chain of events, says Benjamin: history is specific. Terrible things happen, and other things happen too. What he sets against the angel is another equivocal figure: the historical materialist, who has to bring an energy drawn from his own times to the past: an understanding of the crisis of the time in which he lives, and of the always-present possibility of change that is hidden in the present moment. Add to that individual figure the qualities Benjamin identifies as the 'refined and spiritual' qualities developed in the course of political struggle: 'confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude' ('Concept' 390); and an alternative to despair begins to take shape. It is not good enough to allow oneself, like the angel, to be driven blindly into the future; it is essential to understand that revolutionary changes have taken place in the past—always unforeseen, and always taken for granted in retrospect—and to look in our difficult present times to that same possibility of things being otherwise.

The historical materialist is not a single, fixed figure here, any more than the angel has a single manifestation. His position evolves throughout the text, sometimes deeply compromised, both personally (there are teasing references to Benjamin's close friend Brecht in several sections) and in terms of the wider political world, particularly Stalin's Soviet Union, which Benjamin did not feel able at that time to discuss in print.

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I want to suggest a connection between Benjamin's horrified angel, throwing up its hands as it is driven blindly backwards into the future, and Timothy Morton's discussion in his 2007 book, *Ecology without Nature*, of the beautiful soul.

Morton, acknowledging his debt to Hegel, characterises the beautiful soul as 'wash[ing] his or her hands of the corrupt world, refusing to admit how in this very abstemiousness and distaste he or she participates in the creation of that world. The world-weary soul holds all beliefs and ideas at a distance.' This soul deplores the state of the world, while failing to acknowledge her or his own role in what's happening, as creator or beneficiary. And the beautiful soul creates what Morton describes as 'beautiful Nature'; it 'twinkles and glitters like Bambi's blinking eyes' (*Ecology* 119).

There's an intersection here between time and place: between Benjamin's dialectical sense of past and future, and the critique of some ecological thinking—a sentimental privileging of the 'natural' world—that Morton develops in his book. As Morton says provocatively in his introduction: 'Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration' (5).

You might call this beautiful soul the angel of Nature. In its world, according to Morton, 'there is a place for everything except uncertainty' (156). The beautiful soul experiences the ecological crisis of our time as something separate from its own, purified existence. In writing about Nature, the beautiful soul has an appalling tendency to collapse into Edwardian sentimentality. Morton describes this kind of writing as ecomimetic, 'a form of ideological fantasy' (67), and what he opposes to it is what he calls ecocritique: 'a twofold process, consisting both in exuberant friendliness and disarming scepticism' (67–68).

Morton quotes Schlegel on this derailment of positive thinking: 'Schlegel determined that irony was democratic. All truth claims are fragmentary, and the more you know, the more you realize that your own perspective is shot through with fragmentariness, negativity, and hesitation. You start to tolerate other ways of life' (100). He goes on to connect this radical sense of uncertainty to Kristeva's sense of the abject: 'the qualities of the world we slough off in order to maintain subjects and objects. Ecological politics is bound up with what to do with pollution, miasma, slime: things that glisten, schlup and decay' (159). This murky aesthetic is directly opposed to the angel of a fetishised nature. He gives a pointer—succinct but in need of rather more practical detail—to another mode of being: 'The only ethical option is to muck in' (13)—recalling again Benjamin's cardinal virtues, or, closer in time, Joan Retallack's 'instinctive hope, strategic optimism, or . . . unaccountably cheerful—always precarious—retrofit of despair' (Retallack 19).

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Mucking in, of course, is no simple matter for the working artist, whether in language or other materials. In a later book, *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Morton calls for a constant and vigilant irony, in opposition to what he perceives as mindless activisim: 'Irony isn't just a slogan on a cool t-shirt; it's the way coexistence feels. Don't just do something—sit there' (125). Morton's versions are complex: that we should avoid 'being hamstrung by that . . . environmentalist meme, the threat of imminent doom'; and that 'we should act ecologically out of a modified Kantian duty that doesn't depend on a powerful aesthetic experience such as the sublime to ground it' (123). 'But in the mean time, sitting there will upgrade your version of doing and sitting' (125). In his attempts to pin down a genuinely ecological aesthetic, he skips from one contemporary cultural icon to another; somewhere in a landscape occupied both by *Blade Runner* (*Ecology* 187–88) and the novels of Virginia Woolf (*Thought* 107) there is a terrain in which Morton's positive ecological thinking can take place, refusing to allow terror or grief to get in the way of a persistent, deliberate, willed optimism.

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In a note to 'On the Concept of History,' Walter Benjamin began to imagine a model of social change that would have been completely alien to the Marxists of his time:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely the human race—to activate the emergency brake. (402)

Benjamin's image wittily inverted a conventional (in Marxist terms) image, to produce a different version of change. Written in the last year of his life, the passage and its implications are not explored. Would those less glamorous agents of revolution—not the exceptional revolutionary or the revolutionary party as the advance guard of revolution, or even the Marxist historian at work in the library, but humans in general—be drawing on history in their moments of crisis, or would they be enmeshed in the complexities of their own present moment: one of them leaning out of the window, wind in her hair and smoke in her eyes, exclaiming in horror at the hazard lying ahead; another reaching for the emergency cord and shouting to fellow passengers to hold on tight—and others, of course, watching the drama with mild interest, unable to imagine that the train might not reach its usual destination? Benjamin proposes ordinary people in this passage as agents of change: not necessarily knowledgeable about Marxist theory or world history, but exceptional in their quick thinking, in their ability to see a hazard and react to avoid it, thereby changing the course of history.

What a poet has to offer the twenty-first century as a poet may be, rather than a fixed political commitment to, say, the environment or to social change, an openness to what is new, to the precise observation of things that are in flux. Add to this an acute and unsentimental awareness of the difficult past. A political definition as, say, eco-feminist or green, whether claimed by the poet herself or imposed by reader, reviewer or critic, no matter how well-intended, may begin to function as a boundary fence, sabotaging the unpredictable work of poetry, which ranges across time and place to reorganise memory and perception into something new: in Benjamin's terms, 'appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger' ('Concept' 391). Its raw material may not be the natural world as opposed to the human, but the most challenging aspects of our contemporary lives. The poet's attempt to present a respectable, articulate and politically responsible stable self may be effective in a particular situation, but is likely in the longer run to be undermined by her own work, quietly, behind her back. Keats got there first: 'What shocks the philosopher,' he wrote on 27 October

1818, 'delights the cameleon poet,' and he went on to say that the poet has 'no identity . . . he is continually in for—and filling some other Body'; he opposed this position to what he called 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'—another manifestation of the beautiful soul.

A poet may well engage with historical time, re-examining the past in order to crack open the potential of the present. Alternatively, she may focus intensely on the complexities and contradictions of the present; she may be an expert in dissecting the workings of the everyday. These two positions are not mutually exclusive: a poet may remake herself and the world around her, to some extent, with each new work, large or small. Benjamin's spark of connection between past and present may take the form in the poet's work of a deep engagement with the work of other poets, of other times, which may not be immediately obvious to the reader, or of a powerful sense of historical time and of alternative readings of the historical record in her poetry; alternatively, a new poem, while inevitably drawing on its maker's engagement with some form of literary tradition, may offer the shock of something that appears to be new, that engages profoundly with a specific and transient present moment. In the face of 'prostrate' politicians, as Benjamin puts it, the poet may develop some contemporary version of what he calls 'monastic discipline,' 'designed to turn . . . away from the world and its affairs' (393); and the present moment 'which is not a transition, but in which time comes to a stop' may be the moment of a poem.

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On the front page of her website, Jill Jones sets out a complex and demanding personal aesthetic, which dates back at least in part to a 1995 chapbook, *Invisible Ink* (Minter 2005), and which, after eighteen years, is likely to represent a fully considered position.

She begins with an assertion of poem as mirror: 'My poems reflect places which are mainly urban and strewn with emblems and texts, accidental or deliberate.' There is a randomness to what is found in a poem, in this aesthetic: a refusal of absolute control on the part of the poet. The accidental has the same status here as the deliberate—though whether accident or deliberation belong to the particular place or to the poet's choice of scene is not entirely clear. Needless to say, this mirroring component of Jones's poetry is not all that there is to it. She goes on:

I'm interested in relationships between states and locales, shifting borders, the openings in closures, pleasures of exploration, the great themes, like the weather. Walking is important, slow mobility across terrain, the temporal process. (Accessed 14 Feb 2013)

Again there is an ambiguity, carefully left open for the reader to explore. These 'states and locales': are we to understand 'states' as some version of the political structure, as in nation-states or the state of New South Wales, or does the word imply some version of states of being, of the human consciousness at a particular moment in a particular locale?—which may itself, as she has just said, itself be present in the poem, bringing its random 'emblems and texts' into play with the poet's state of mind? Similarly, 'shifting borders, the openings in closures, pleasures of exploration' leave open the site of such concerns: the body, the erotic, or the wider culture; the social or the individual, if such a distinction should be made. With the final sentence of this paragraph, however, it appears that the poet is now actively at work; walking is central to her practice. Here the movement of the body is brought into play with time: slow steps replacing chronological measurement, working their way across 'terrain'—a

term more military than literary, and more generally used in relation to open landscape than the city. 'Terrain' is something to be surveyed, managed, dealt with, occupied: the raw material of the poet's perception. Meanwhile 'the weather' is casually established as a perennial theme for poetry, putting it well outside any recent concerns in relation to climate change.

For Jones, 'place' has been urban first of all: she recalls reading Wordsworth's 'Lines written on Westminster Bridge' as an early revelation: 'wow, you could write about cities, it didn't have to be about gum trees, stockmen and kangaroos, or epics of ancient times, or light brigades or ladies palely loitering' (Brennan). Later she moved on to Kenneth Slessor's 'William Street': 'The red globes of light, the liquor-green . . . You find this ugly, I find it lovely.' Those poems which inhabit places outside the city are more likely to record graffiti on a national park sign (as in 'Bridge,' *Broken/Open* 64) than to contemplate some version of the 'natural' world.

Jones identifies issues of scale in her poems: she is 'working somewhere between the lyric and something broader, more discursive'; what she begins with are 'either investigations of interiority or sensuality merged with the figurative which may also speak to larger structures.' The poems do not restrict such movements; they 'have become a broken song—fragmented, flagrant, floating—perhaps an abstract or ruined lyric, where "I" has shifted from the centre.' Those adjectives—'fragmented, flagrant, floating'—are held together by assonance, but smuggle in between the delicacies of 'fragmented' and 'floating' the startling 'flagrant': a jarring claim for in-your-face confrontation. Disintegration can release dangerous energies, it seems.

Jones goes on to talk about 'texture, pattern and transience,' about 'asking questions about how the pieces don't fit as shards alter meanings'; she likes 'linguistic play,' which she finds in the tension between 'connectedness and parataxis, the flexing of thought / meditation and critique, including self-critique'—a downbeat note on which this credo comes to an end.

Theodor Adorno said that Benjamin 'conceived the downfall of the subject and the salvation of man as inseparable,' and he connected this position to a deep belief in the possibility of happiness: 'Anyone who was drawn to him was bound to feel like the child who catches a glimpse of the lighted Christmas tree through a crack in the closed door.' (230) In Jones's statement, the dislodging of 'I' may allow other kinds of movement to co-exist within the poem, freed from the shackles of a single, coherent identity, such as 'the flexing of thought / meditation and critique, including self-critique': a Benjaminian refusal to take a fixed position, which opens the poem at once to doubt, despair, humour and hope: to the coexistence of many kinds of consciousness in one mind.

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In a beautiful passage in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin wrote of the way in which art can begin to embody the future:

In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but

in its interferences—where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn. (474)

Meanwhile the past persists in inhabiting the present moment. As Joan Retallack says, 'The contemporary doesn't leave history behind; it further complicates it. We're still embedded in the detritus of all your centuries, better and worse' (11). The uncertainty within which we live, and the unpredictability of the future, even with our new understanding of the dangers of which scientists have been trying to warn us, is also part of that knowledge. To imagine the future as a single, inevitable catastrophe is to deny the complexity of the present moment, and the multiple possibilities that it contains.

In 'Leaving it to the sky,' Jones constructs an electronic, corporate culture, a creeping social conservatism, a citified reproduction of a nonhuman natural world and a human consciousness struggling with instability and loss. She sets against this the sharply remembered details of a childhood in another more frugal and less glamorous time, unrecoverable but offering perhaps some indication of a very different, frugal future, not yet accessible to us, but one which may already be beginning to form itself in the minds of the young.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In an email dated 15 July 2014, Jill Jones has very generously described some of the political sources for the poem. 'I remember I quite consciously used John Howard's old term for himself and his policies, and the Liberal Party, "relaxed and comfortable", and was seeing this kind of self-conscious white Aussie bonzer true blue boyoness in Rudd as well. At the time, Rudd would often use the phrase "having a yak with..." [so-and-so], and I think he still did up till his exit (probably still does). Also... in his victory speech in 2007, Rudd urged the ALP to have [a] strong cup of tea and an Iced Vo-Vo, but then get to work. As for the overarching narrative, there was a lot of talk about this at the time, 2008-10, in that, "has the Labor Govt got an overarching narrative", or lost it, or whatever.' She goes on to characterise her comments as 'just a personal footnote,' which 'has no bearing on the article. Never believe a poet.'

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